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Suzanne Levin, *La République de Prieur de la Marne: Défendre les droits de l'homme en état de guerre, 1792-an II*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2022. 563 pp. Chronology, chronology of missions, notes, index of names, index of place names. €45.00. ISBN 9-78-2140208508.

Review by Paul Hanson, Butler University.

This is an impressive first book, the outgrowth of a *thèse du doctorat* under the direction of Marc Belissa at *Université de Paris-Nanterre*. Levin notes in her introduction that Pierre-Louis Prieur—Prieur de la Marne—is the only member of the Committee of Public Safety without a full biography, but this is not really a biography (though at 500 pages of text it is hard to call it *less* than a biography!). There is little in the book about Prieur's birth or life prior to 1789, but there is a great deal about the role that Prieur played in the Revolution, as a deputy in the Constituent Assembly and the National Convention, as a member of the Committee of Public Safety, and especially as a representative on mission from late 1792 through the Year II. The book draws on research in a wide array of national and local archives and libraries, and Levin addresses quite deftly the relevant recent historiography of the Revolution in both France and the Anglophone world.

Levin begins with an examination of the foundations of Prieur's revolutionary politics, which she situates in the writings of eighteenth-century republican theorists and the natural law tradition extending back to the medieval era. She emphasizes that neither of those intellectual traditions was univocal, and that Prieur himself was no political theorist, but rather an "homme politique" (p. 81). While we do not generally think of Prieur as being in the revolutionary vanguard, Levin notes that he expressed republican views even in the Constituent Assembly, well in advance of most of his colleagues (p. 39). He was more a man of action than of words, although Levin draws upon his speeches and letters as well as his acts while on mission in the provinces to sketch out the contours of Prieur's republican convictions. These included: a belief in the centrality of the legislative over the executive, devotion to the ideal of reciprocity, an opposition to "domination," whether that be in the military, in the meeting halls of popular societies across France, or in the electoral assemblies of communities large and small, a commitment to a consultative approach in his work on mission, a desire to foster civic participation, and a concern for the welfare of the poor and of soldiers, especially those facing hunger or who found themselves in the hospitals of the Republic.

Prieur joined the Committee of Public Safety in July 1793 and was notable among its members for the amount of time that he spent on mission in the departments of France, so much so that Michel Biard has questioned whether Prieur should be considered an active member of the

Committee.^[1] Levin disagrees, citing the confidence that his colleagues had in him and the conscientious manner in which he maintained contact with the Committee by letter (p.69). Prieur completed five missions between fall 1792 and the summer of 1794: the first to the Army of the Center, the second to Orléans in March 1793 after the attack in that city on the deputy Léonard Bourdon, the third to the Army of the Coasts of Cherbourg in May 1793, the fourth to the Armies of the Rhine, Moselle, and North in August 1793, and the fifth to the Army of the West from October 1793 through the summer of 1794.

While I have presented these missions in their chronological order, the structure of the book is thematic, with chapter headings such as “Une discipline militaire démocratique,” “La centralité législative et ‘le fédéralisme’,” “Encourager la participation démocratique,” and “Une politique sociale républicaine.” Levin stresses throughout the book that Prieur’s experience “on the ground” while on mission informed his views as a deputy in the National Assembly and as a member of the Committee of Public Safety. He viewed the army as a “lieu d’apprentissage civique,” and as such he opposed draconian discipline and argued that soldiers should be treated with dignity and humanity (p. 128). As a deputy in the Constituent Assembly, he spoke in support of the dismissal of aristocratic officers, went on to favor the election of officers by the troops, and on mission came to see the importance of maintaining civil authority over the conduct of military officers, especially generals.

During the period in which Prieur was on mission, it was common for local authorities to criticize representatives on mission as “proconsuls.” The Prieur that we come to know in these pages scarcely fits that label. As Levin notes, he prided himself on attending a meeting of the local popular society in virtually every town he visited. In his mission to Orléans and later to the departments of Morbihan and Finistère he found it necessary to reconstitute local administrative bodies. In every case he proceeded in a consultative manner, convinced that in Orléans a new political elite had come to dominate revolutionary politics and stifle the voices of ordinary citizens. Whenever possible Prieur convened a general assembly prior to naming new officials, especially when, as in Orléans, this involved a municipal council, the administrative body closest to the people, chosen in direct elections. For departmental or district administrations, where officials were chosen by electoral assemblies, Prieur often gathered an assembly of the local popular society for input.

Prieur was not sent on mission explicitly to address the federalist revolt, but in Brittany he found himself confronted with that task. He had first condemned “federalism” in February 1793, months before the revolts broke out, when he spoke critically in the National Convention of the departmental administration of the Var for allocating national funds for the purchase of grain without authorization from the National Convention. Here we see Prieur’s sense of “legislative centrality” at play. In his view, departmental administrations were responsible for enacting laws, not passing them, and officials in the Var had exceeded their authority by allocating funds without legislative approval. Later that year, departmental administrators who supported the federalist revolt had similarly violated their oath of office by refusing to recognize laws and decrees passed by the National Convention. This is an interesting argument, one that Levin takes a step further by observing that Prieur, like other representatives on mission, was an emissary of the legislative branch (the National Convention) and not the executive branch. The Committee of Public Safety, sometimes thought of by historians as an emergency executive branch, was itself constituted by the National Convention and reported to that body.

Another way of thinking about this would be in political terms, that in choosing to resist or challenge what they took to be a “diminished” National Convention, departmental administrators were taking a political action, exercising their right to resist oppression. In this way, too, one might argue that they had exceeded their administrative authority, but in the midst of revolution it is hardly surprising that the line between administrative responsibility and political responsibility was quite fluid.

While on mission to the West, Prieur found himself at a sort of geographic intersection between the federalist revolt (one center of which was in Caen, just east of Morbihan), the Vendée rebellion, and the foreign threat to the coasts of Brittany and Normandy. In his letters Prieur tended to use the same language to refer to the Vendée rebels as he did for English enemies (p. 461). But he also distinguished between those who had been misled or erred temporarily and those who had actively participated in revolt or rebellion. In Levin’s view, Prieur was no supporter of dechristianization, but he did view non-juring priests as enemies of the Republic. He took the Vendéan rebels and the federalist administrators seriously because of the threat that they posed to the Republic. In that regard, Prieur treated the departmental administrators of Finistère more harshly than those of Morbihan (sending some of them before a military commission and ultimately to a death sentence) because the former had jeopardized the military defense of the Breton coast in their refusal to enact decrees issued by the National Convention.

Levin points out that Prieur considered part of his mission, especially in small towns and villages, to inform people of the benefits that the Revolution had brought to them, often discounted or misrepresented by the Rolandine or Brissotin press that circulated from Paris. Not only did he encourage people, especially the common people, to be active in popular societies and political assemblies, he reveled in popular festivals, especially those at which people could sing and dance and celebrate their newly-gained liberties. Levin contrasts the long-term task of sowing republican values with the short-term task of addressing the crises of 1793-94 (p. 273), a dilemma that plagued not only Prieur, but also all of the representatives on mission in 1793-94.

There is much in this rich and insightful book that I have neglected in this relatively short review. Let me conclude with two final thoughts. While Levin argues that the pragmatism of Pierre-Louis Prieur cannot be denied (it was indeed one of his virtues), it would be unfair to say that principle or ideology played no role in his actions. Her book is an exploration of what it meant to be a republican in the 1790s. For Levin, Prieur’s republican values are not to be dismissed as utopian, but rather can serve as a reminder that the tensions between liberty and equality, and the challenge of defending human rights and participatory democracy, remain as pertinent today as they were in the eighteenth century.

NOTE

[1] Michel Biard, *Missionnaires de la République* (Paris: Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques, 2002), 220.

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